

Towards a Canadian Urban Strategy

Framework for Government of Canada
Involvement in Urban Affairs

Submission to the
Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues
by the
Canadian Institute of Planners

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Introduction

The Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) sets and administers the benchmarks for excellence in planning across Canada. The Institute has existed since 1919 and has a national membership of over 5,000 with Affiliate offices representing planners in each of Canada's provinces and territories. Working with these Affiliates, the Institute sets national standards for training, certification, best practices, and accredits and recognizes university Planning degree programs. In addition, CIP's *Statement of Values* and *Code of Professional Conduct* set out important principles to which CIP, its Affiliates, and its members subscribe, individually and as a professional organization.

CIP members come from many backgrounds. We have training and professional experience in specialties such as land use planning, social planning, environmental planning, transportation planning, economic planning, and urban design.

Our members understand Canada's cities. We can help to identify and solve Canada's urban challenges.

This paper is based on opinions and suggestions presented by our members, generated by a national, multi-stage consultative process. Our members have identified urban challenges and solutions for consideration by the Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues.

1. Context: Canada's Urban Challenges

Canada's cities are in trouble. Many are approaching crisis. Canada's cities are no longer the model of urban efficiency and effectiveness long envied by other nations.

Our urban quality of life is slipping. Canadian cities are falling behind their American and European counterparts. As a nation, we can pay now and control these problems, or we will pay much more in future with no promise of success. In many cases, it will be too late.

Canada's cities are essential to this country's economic, cultural and social future. However, Canada's cities need assistance, and they need it now. Canada needs to invest in its cities to generate economic development, revitalize core areas, replace and upgrade infrastructure, develop transit systems, and enhance the urban natural environment. Much needs to be done to address critical economic, environmental and social issues in our cities.

Our members have identified key issues that include:

- **Economic competitiveness.** Canadian cities lack the fiscal capacity necessary to compete successfully for economic development in the global economy. This puts our quality of life, economic growth, and the future prosperity of our country at risk. All levels of Canadian government have roles to play in ensuring that our cities and major urban centres provide a functional and commercially viable base for businesses that must compete in both domestic and international markets.
- **Environmental degradation.** The environments of Canada's cities have been compromised by the impacts of sprawl at the urban edge and inner city decay. The health and integrity of natural environments adjacent to cities are threatened. Urban revitalization is a complex proposition. There are few policy, program or fiscal incentives to encourage private investment in stagnant inner city areas.
- **Decay of urban infrastructure.** Urban physical infrastructure (e.g., water supply, waste water and sewage management) is often outdated, inefficient and unsafe in Canadian cities.
- § **Inadequacy of transportation systems.** Urban and inter-urban road and transit systems are inadequate in many urban regions. Capital and operating costs are under-supported by senior government.
- § **Housing.** In many cities, housing is not affordable, choice and supply is limited, or does not meet the needs of Canada's changing urban socio-cultural profiles (e.g., aging population, new family structures).

- § **Meeting the needs of vulnerable groups.** The individual, family and community costs associated with urban poverty, homelessness and crime are significant and increasing in scale and scope. Other key issues include the challenges associated with Canada's urban aboriginals and the settlement and adjustment needs of immigrants in larger urban centres.

2. Why are cities in trouble?

This situation is the result of many factors that include resource constraints, lack of institutional capacity, different perspectives on urban issues and their significance, and varying degrees of political will. CIP has identified several key issues:

- § **Municipal governments lack sufficient own-source revenues.** Canada's cities are unable to address these issues in an effective manner because they must rely on limited own-source revenues, the majority of which are generated by property taxes. As a consequence, our cities "plan by assessment". Property taxes are usually regressive. There is no tolerance for further increases in property taxes.
- § **Uncoordinated policy and program delivery.** There is a sense that the three levels of government are not coordinating their efforts in Canada's cities. This leads to duplication (or absence) of effort in some cases, misplaced or uninformed priorities. In other cases, municipalities are compelled to compete for funding. This is not conducive to collaborative solutions to urban challenges. Competition between municipalities or posturing between levels of government contributes to missed opportunities.
- § **Downloading.** Municipal governments must contend with increasing demands for services when senior governments have downloaded more responsibilities without sufficient financial compensation to municipalities.
- § **Reduced fiscal transfers.** Federal and provincial transfers are increasingly conditional and generally inadequate in scale and impact.
- § **The information base is fragmented and incomplete.** A considerable amount of urban-based research has been conducted regarding the plight of Canadian cities. However, much of this research is issue or city-specific and thus cannot be readily generalized or transferred for application in other cities. Other concerns include the age of data, under-study of key urban issues, affordability of and accessibility to data generated by the Government of Canada. As a result, it is difficult to address urban issues without a sufficient research foundation.

3. What needs to be done?

The Government of Canada has played a significant and welcome role in the evolution of our cities. The federal contribution is needed now more than ever to help Canadian cities help themselves. In the past, the Government of Canada developed policies and implemented programs that contributed significantly to the development of Canada's cities. It is CIP's position that the Government of Canada must resume this role and help Canada's cities address complex issues. Our analysis indicates that:

- § **Canada needs a clear national urban vision and strategy.** A firm, realizable vision of healthy, sustainable, and competitive cities is needed that acknowledges the diversity of Canada's urban regions. This vision would guide federal resource decisions and priorities. The Government of Canada needs to consult with national and urban stakeholders to create a national vision for cities that defines their roles and contributions to Canada's quality of life, health, economic and cultural development.
- § **Resources must accompany responsibilities.** Downloading of responsibilities is inappropriate without a commensurate shift of fiscal resources to deliver policies and programs. Canadian cities have access to a very limited share of revenue sources to fulfill the responsibilities that have been newly delegated to them. This must be explored and redressed.
- § **Existing resources must be used better.** The Government of Canada needs to make more efficient and effective use of resources before allocating new resources. This can be achieved by making more effective and strategic use of existing federal policies, statutes and programs. It is also necessary to ensure that existing federal programs with an urban focus are coordinated with provincial and municipal urban strategies, and are properly funded.
- § **Strategic investments are essential.** The economic, environmental and social health of cities requires significant, sustained and focused financial investment. Investment is required in economic development, physical infrastructure, social services, transportation and transit, communications, housing and environmental protection.

A suite of cost-shared programs could address strategic urban challenges, and stimulate significant private sector investment. Funding should be directed to high-priority urban issues such as transportation, transit, environmental stewardship, non-profit and social housing, and social services for Aboriginal peoples and recent immigrants. Urban regeneration should be a federal priority for initiatives such as core area revitalization, heritage restoration, neighbourhood renewal, preservation of urban natural areas, and brownfields redevelopment.

- § **Meaningful inter-governmental consultations are essential.** The Government of Canada needs to consult on a regular basis with municipal governments.

Trilateral or multilateral consultation mechanisms and protocols are necessary for the design, development, finance and implementation of policies, statutes and programs. Federal departments and agencies should comply with, and advance, municipal urban planning and development policies in decisions regarding facilities location, development and leasing.

§ **The knowledge base needs to be enhanced.** Greater support is required for continuing, current and expanded research on strategic urban issues. We need to acquire a sound understanding of urban issues, based on research and extensive consultations with key stakeholders and from this derive future policies and programs. A National Centre for Urban Excellence could be created that generates applied research on urban issues and acts as a central clearing house for urban-oriented information. Further, we need to expand financial support for urban-oriented research programs administered by federal agencies and departments such as CMHC, PWGSC and Environment Canada. Finally, federal funding should be restored to university graduate students who undertake urban-oriented research (e.g., CMHC scholarships program).

§ **Government of Canada activities must be coordinated.** Federal government decisions about employment, property development, and resource management have significant impacts on urban economies and quality of life. Synergies can be realized among federal programs and projects; this requires coordination at the Cabinet level.

A Cabinet Minister should be responsible for urban issues, supported by a department (Urban Affairs) with a mandate to undertake and coordinate research, policy development, and program delivery based on inter-governmental consultation. This Minister would be responsible for the proposed National Centre for Urban Excellence, initiatives such as the Infrastructure Canada Program, and agencies such as Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

4. The Canadian Institute of Planners can contribute.

CIP is well placed to contribute to these challenges. Our members have the research skills, professional experience, understanding of public and private milieux, training and inter-disciplinary perspective necessary to improve our shared understanding of urban issues and solutions.

CIP is committed to supporting the Government of Canada's efforts by:

- § *Facilitating the creation of the national urban vision and strategy*
- § *Contributing advice to the design and delivery of policies, programs and projects*
- § *Coordinating and making accessible to diverse stakeholders urban-oriented research carried out by our practitioner and academic members*
- § *Acting as an advisory body or sounding board for federal decision-makers*
- § *Monitoring and evaluating the performance of the national urban vision and strategy in partnership with the Government of Canada*

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